

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1BALTIMORE SUN
16 July 1986

Reagan OK'd talks to keep door open

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WASHINGTON — Backed by most of his advisers, President Reagan agreed to a Soviet request for an urgent arms control meeting this month mainly because refusal might have harmed preparations for a summit and granted Moscow a needless propaganda advantage, administration officials said yesterday.

These officials said they thought Mr. Reagan's positive reply had kept the way open for — but didn't guarantee — a meeting in Washington later this year between Mr. Reagan and Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader.

Though the Soviets still haven't accepted a date for the summit, U.S. officials appeared unusually satisfied with current prospects.

President Reagan told GOP congressional leaders yesterday that he was confident of receiving Mr. Gorbachev in the White House this year as promised. Other well-placed administration officials have been saying the same thing.

The president informed the Soviets Monday that he would send representatives to a special meeting of the Standing Consultative Committee, a panel of Soviet and American experts formed in 1972 to monitor adherence to arms control treaties.

The SCC usually meets twice a year in Geneva, Switzerland, and its next regular meeting was set for September.

But after President Reagan announced his decision May 27 to repudiate the SALT II treaty limiting strategic weapons, the Soviets asked for a special session this month to discuss U.S. intentions.

The Soviet request revived a long-running debate within the administration. Most senior advisers, including those at the State Department, were described by officials as favoring a positive response; left in the minority were some top civilians in the Defense Department.

Those urging acceptance contended that the United States had

nothing to gain by refusing. Rejection, they said, would contradict recent tentative signs of improvement in Soviet-American relations and deter preparations for a summit to which the president is committed.

They also said that the United States could use the SCC as a forum — as it has done in the past — to raise issues of Soviet non-compliance with arms control treaties.

Finally, they argued that U.S. refusal would make the United States an automatic loser in what some specialists have called "the politics of onus" — shifting blame on the adversary for threatening international peace.

The U.S. decision to go along with the Soviet request was taken without a formal session of the Senior Arms Control Group, which includes representatives from the State and Defense departments, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, the National Security Council and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

Administration officials said the Defense Department was unhappy with the lack of plenary meetings of the Senior Arms Control Group, where Defense representatives have promoted their views effectively in the past.

In the meantime, the administration is preparing another arms control decision that senior officials say will have much more effect on the course of Soviet-American relations than the U.S. agreement to meet the Russians in Geneva this month.

Expected to be ready in coming days is President Reagan's reply to Mr. Gorbachev's letter last month offering an interim agreement spanning offensive nuclear weapons and strategic defenses.

According to the Soviets, Mr. Gorbachev's proposal includes a mutual commitment to honor the 1972 treaty on missile defenses for at least another 15 years, to restrict research on advanced strategic defenses to laboratory experiments and to reduce offensive nuclear weapons.

Soviet spokesmen have said that a summit in Washington this year

depends on a conducive political atmosphere and prospects for agreement in at least one area of arms control.

When Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev met in Geneva last November, they announced follow-up summits in Washington this year and in Moscow in 1987.

Administration officials said that backstage preparations for a Washington summit have been under way even without a firm date.

The most visible prelude to a summit would be a meeting between Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze, which U.S. officials expect to take place in September.